



WOMEN OF WITNESS

TIPS TO BETTER YOUR RELATIONSHIP WITH OTHERS

Gaslighting: Turning off the Gas on Your Gaslighter

By Robin Stern, Ph. D.

What is gaslighting? Gaslighting is an insidious and sometimes covert form of emotional abuse, repeated over time, where the abuser leads the target to question their judgments, reality, and, in extreme cases, their own sanity. It's a type of psychological manipulation in which a gaslighter—the more powerful person in a relationship—tries to convince you that you're misremembering, misunderstanding, or misinterpreting your own behavior or motivations, thus creating doubt in your mind that leaves you vulnerable and confused.

Gaslighting is always a creation and interplay of two people: A gaslighter, who needs to be right to preserve their own sense of self and to keep a sense of power in the world; and a gaslightee, who is manipulated into allowing the gaslighter to define their sense of reality because they idealize the gaslighter and seek their approval. When someone you have chosen to trust, respect and love speaks with certainty—especially if there is a grain of truth in it—it can be extremely difficult not to believe them.

Neither of you may be aware that this is happening. The gaslighter may genuinely believe that they are saving you from yourself but they are driven by their own needs to seem like a strong, powerful person—they must prove they are right, and you must agree. And even if only a small part of you feels the need for your gaslighter's approval, you are susceptible to gaslighting.

So how do you turn off the gas? Here are five shifts to alter the dynamic between you and your gaslighter:

1. Sort out truth from distortion. Often, our gaslighters tell us their version of events, and we get completely thrown. There's just enough truth in their version to make us think that the whole package is true. Sorting out the truth from the distortion can be a helpful step in turning off the gas. Pay close attention to what your gaslighter says and how the conversation flows. Write down, "I said, he said, I said, he said" to the best of your ability and see—in black and white—how your gaslighter distorts what has happened or pivots away from it, making their agenda the new and only topic to be discussed.

2. Decide whether the conversation is really a power struggle. If it is, opt out. Gaslighting is so insidious that you don't always realize what the conversation is really about. A fight can continue for hours with the gaslighter becoming angrier and more intense, trying to prove they are right, and you becoming more and more desperate, trying to win them over. If you can't convince them, you may start to feel that their accusations are correct. If you are not arguing about an actual incident, you can be sure you are enmeshed in a power struggle. The difference between a power struggle and a genuine conversation is this: In a genuine conversation, both people are listening to and addressing each other's concerns, even if they get emotional at times. If you decide that a power struggle is going on, your first step in turning off the gas is to identify it and disengage.

3. Identify the triggers for both you and your gaslighter. Both you and your gaslighter are dancing the Gaslight Tango, and you both likely have triggers that start a dance. Once you can identify these triggers, you will be more successful in avoiding them. Triggers can range from topics like family and money to specific situations, language, or behaviors. Either of you might start the tango, depending on the situation. Try to approach this topic without shame or blame. Focus on identifying your mutual gaslight triggers so you both can start turning off the gas. Think about your gaslighter—are there particular situations in which they’re especially prone to gaslight you? Can you step back with compassion for yourself and observe your unwitting participation in the dynamic? When those situations arise, commit to being mindful and stepping away rather than participating.

4. Focus on feelings instead of “right” and “wrong”. A gaslighter frequently makes accusations that ring true. Your gaslighter zeros in on these vulnerable moments or missteps, and you wince in recognition. To free yourself from this trap, stop worrying about which one of you is right and focus on your feelings. If you’re feeling genuine remorse, apologize and do your best to make up. If you are feeling angry because you are being unfairly criticized, slow down your reaction, take a deep breath and opt out of the argument by using short, simple statements that don’t invite response. If you are feeling bewildered, attacked, devastated, or terrorized, no matter what you did—even if you also feel regret—you are being gaslighted and should disengage immediately.

5. Remember that you can’t control anyone’s opinion—even if you’re right! One of the biggest hooks in the gaslighting process is a desperate wish to get the other to agree that you are right. In reality, you are just as committed to controlling your gaslighter’s thoughts as they are to controlling yours. They alone have the power over their own thoughts and will see things their way no matter what you do or say. As soon as you understand that it doesn’t matter how right you are, the closer you will be to freedom. It can be very challenging to stop gaslighting. If you’re not making the kind of progress you’d like, consider finding a therapist, a support group, or some other type of help to give your efforts a boost.

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